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San Francisco Journal;A Monument Caught in the Middle

By MICHAEL J. YBARRA
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In 1906 a great earthquake destroyed much of this city, and the terrible fire that followed finished off most of what was left. Defying nature's fury in front of the rubble of City Hall was the 800-ton Pioneer Monument, a sculptural marker commemorating the history and settlement of California, a tower of civic pride that stood even taller in the wake of disaster.

But 90 years later, what earthquake could not destroy has become a 47-foot lightning rod for criticism and controversy, a symbol of swirling debate over history, heritage and ethnic sensibilities.

The huge granite pedestal topped by a bronze statue has four life-size groups of sculpture around the base, including one that shows an Indian on the ground, with a friar standing over him who is pointing to heaven and a Spanish vaquero raising a hand in triumph.

Some American Indians call the monument an offensive tribute to the genocidal conquest of the West. Many historians call it a period piece, perhaps insensitive by contemporary standards but still only an artifact from the past.

To Stanlee Gatti, whose two months as the president of the San Francisco Art Commission have been dominated by the brouhaha, the monument is a 1.6-million-pound headache. "There's no easy way out of something like this," he said. "There's no way to make everybody happy."

This afternoon Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr., who has been inundated with criticism from residents, the Roman Catholic Church and even the Government of Spain, made a rare appearance before the Art Commission to urge the different groups to resolve the five-year-old dispute.

"I'm glad I don't have to vote," the Mayor said at the meeting, which ended with a compromise on the wording of a plaque for the monument that may or may not quiet the controversy.

A century ago things were simpler: a man named James Lick left the city $100,000 to build a monument, which was dedicated in 1894 in front of City Hall, at the juncture of Grove, Hyde and Market streets. By 1991, when the city decided to move the monument to make way for a new public library, it overlooked a parking lot and abutted the pornographic theaters and fast-food joints of a seedy stretch of Market Street.

The plan called for using 20 heavy-duty steel carrying beams on hydraulic dollies to drag the bronze behemoth one block and place it in the middle of Fulton Street, between the old and new libraries and across a park from the new City Hall. That turned out to be the easy part.

Preservationists objected to moving the statue at all; Indians wanted it junked. Before the move, protesters encircled the granite base, gallons of red paint were splashed on the sculpture and rocks were lobbed at the statue.

The memorial, wrote Martina O'Dea of the American Indian Movement Confederation, "symbolizes the humiliation, degradation, genocide and sorrow inflicted upon this country's indigenous people by a foreign invader, through religious persecution and ethnic prejudice."

The Art Commission finally decided on a compromise: it would install a brass plaque to explain the misfortunes suffered by the indigenous population.

"With their efforts over in 1834, the missionaries left behind about 56,000 converts -- and 150,000 dead," the proposed inscription read. "Half the original Native American population had perished during this time from disease, armed attacks and mistreatment."

The plaque was still at the foundry when controversy flared again, shortly before its scheduled installation on the monument last month.

Archbishop William J. Levada of the Archdiocese of San Francisco wrote to Mayor Brown that the wording was an insult to the church and that the introduction of devastating diseases to the continent was an unexpected consequence of European exploration and not a deliberate effort to

kill off the Indians, as he said the plaque intimated. Spain's consul general echoed his sentiments.

But in letters to the Art Commission, others insisted that the inscription was not tough enough on the church. One suggested quoting, in Latin, from the letters of a priest who wrote that Indians were not human. "The Indians have all gone to heaven," another letter writer said, "but rest assured the Christian missionaries have all gone to hell!"

On the other hand, Jeffrey Burns, the archdiocesan archivist, said that the Indians fared better under the missions than they did under either the Mexican or the United States Government. Others pointed out that Bishop Bartolome de las Casas dedicated his life to fighting for Indians and that the modern-day Franciscans feed hundreds of destitute people a day a few blocks from the monument, at their soup kitchen.

No one denies that the Indians were mistreated, but many scholars take exception to fixing any direct blame. John Schlegel, the president of the University of San Francisco, and Kevin Starr, the state librarian and an expert in California history, called the wording "a horrible and hateful distortion of the truth" in a letter to the commission.

They also have taken issue with benevolent depictions of the Gold Rush, saying that the Forty-Niners, who are also depicted on the monument, were worse than either the Spanish or the missionaries and actually practiced genocide.

Mr. Gatti heard from virtually everyone at today's meeting. Although Mr. Gatti favored leaving the monument with no plaque, he recommended deleting three words from the current version: "and 150,000 dead." The commission agreed, and also added a phrase attributing the decline of the Indian population to European contact, taking the onus off the church.

The commission also discussed soliciting an additional monument giving the Indian point of view.

Whether today's actions will satisfy everyone, or anyone, remains to be seen. "Retribution for Native Americans is not going to be granted by a plaque," Mr. Gatti said.

Photo: Images of the conquest of America on the Pioneer Monument in SanFrancisco have landed the century-old work in a modern-day dispute. (Darcy Padilla for The New York Times)

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